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ABSTRACT

To isolate those features of adult-child dialogue that are associated with high verbal ability, tape recordings were made of 21 twenty-minute conversations in the homes of twelve 7-1/2 to 8-1/2 year old boys. The resulting dialogues were coded and grouped for analysis as follows: Total Sample; Sub-Sample of 500 Consecutive Utterances; Longer than Average Dialogues; and Adult Child Dialogues. A j test was used to gauge the significance of the difference between group means. An adult from each family was interviewed, and each family was treated in individual case studies. The majority of the findings indicate that adult-focal child dialogues are pivotally related to the verbal ability of the focal child. Above average verbal ability seems to be associated with a situation in which the mother initiates but then assumes a secondary conversational role. In school terms, the standard dialect teacher should interact directly with the student rather than the whole class; and the student should be encouraged to use the dialect he is learning in a school setting. (DB)

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VERBAL INTERACTION AND VERBAL ABILITY: RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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Research and Practice — The Case of Standard Dialect

The relationship between research and practice in education — particularly any form of language teaching — is elusive at best and sometimes non-existent. This is not to suggest that language education or education in general is uniquely flawed; medicine may be much the same. In some cases there are entire research libraries on a particular field, as in the case of reading. Yet much of this research is conflicting and the actual practice in a given school often depends as much on the vaguaries of academic politics as on the accumulation of unequivocal evidence. In fact, book salesmen and publishers often have schools and regions mapped out as to the reading philosophy of the teachers — based on the influence of a given professor of reading and how many protegees he has in key decision making positions. In this regard, Jeanne Chall's book *Reading — The Great Debate*, (1967) for all its thorough scholarship, can be expected to have a disproportionately small effect on the teaching of reading because Dr. Chall has not trained sufficient numbers of followers to influence statewide adoptions.

In other cases teachers seem to persist in the face of virtually incontestable evidence — as with the teaching of grammar. Braddock's (1963) study of the effect of teaching grammar — all kinds — on children's writing ability showed no effect: teaching grammar of any kind with any method over any period of time does not improve students' writing. *The lack of effect* of this study is predictable since it does not pose an alternative that can be developed by publishers. When, on the other hand, the "new grammar" appeared several years after Braddock we saw a diverse array of new texts and statewide adoptions led by the Roberts series.

Some of the same relationships between research and politics and the teachers' need for "material" are evident in programs for teaching the middle-class white or school dialect to speakers of non-standard English. The research thus far (e.g. Lin, 1965) has shown that dialect instruction can not be done effectively, yet teachers and others continue to insist that it should be done. There appear to be at least three somewhat questionable reasons for this insistence. The first is that there are alleged to be large numbers of white middle class employers who refuse to hire men and women who do not speak the local version of the standard dialect. If this particular received opinion has been investigated in the years since 1940 when C. C. Fries pointed out the failure of standard dialect instruction, I am not aware of it. If the notion of the language purist employer is a projection of the pedagogical mentality, we should know about it. This should not simply be a case of "everybody knows."

The second reason for the persistence of the view that the standard dialect should be taught is that it helps students learn to read and write. Labov's work (1967) with reading and a non-standard Harlem dialect sug-

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gests that this concern may be exaggerated, that children apprehend the concepts of e.g., past, possessive, and third person even though they themselves may fail to produce the appropriate inflections.

Finally, teachers feel impelled to teach the standard dialect in part because they see students learning it and they know that some adults have command over both the standard and non-standard dialect. If people can learn it, why shouldn't we teach it in school? The answer brings us back to the issue of research and practice in education. Leaving aside for the moment the important and often highly volatile question of whether the standard dialect *should* be taught to speakers of the non-standard form, a principal reason that so many attempts to teach the standard form have failed is that they have proceeded from incorrect assumptions and inadequate research.

Pattern practice, which seems to have achieved satisfactory results with foreign language teaching, has been assumed to be an appropriate model for teaching standard dialect. When faced with the failure of pattern practice drills to overcome the negative associations of the standard dialect the advocates of pattern practice seem inclined to urge more and better practice rather than to question the efficiency of their chosen model. But since they lack alternative procedures and materials, teachers who must, for whatever reasons, teach the standard dialect have little choice but to persist with what is available.

An Alternative Focus for Research

One means of achieving an alternative strategy is to redirect research into the process of first language acquisition. Rather than measuring with ever-increasing precision the relative effectiveness of pattern practice drills, future research should place greater emphasis on the language (dialect) learning process as it occurs naturally in the home and elsewhere. This is not to say that the natural process should or could provide a programmatic basis for more formal instruction. As an important pre-condition for formulating methods of instruction, however, it should be known in some detail.

Although the research to date into the language acquistion process has not stressed dialect *per se*, it does provide two useful insights into that process, insights which, it would seem, should illuminate the teaching of a second dialect. First, research into the language acquisition process (e.g. Ervin, 1964) has shown that imitation is not a sufficiently powerful concept to explain the creative aspects of first language acquistion. A child may learn a set of vocabulary items, but by imitation alone he will not achieve the complex set of understandings enabling him to organize the morphemic constituents of his language in a consistent manner in unfamiliar contexts. The same thing is true of the process of expansion which more closely resembles the idealized model of behavioral learning. Studies by Cazden (1967, 1968) have indicated that even the process of expansion does not produce marked changes in children's language performance. In this connection it should be noted that the process of expansion is, in fact, based upon a type of widely observed mother-child interaction.

A Naturalistic Study of Parent-Child Verbal Interaction

The study reported below investigates one aspect of adult-child verbal interaction which is intended to provide a model for more systematic language instruction. The study is based on the assumption that while all physically and psychologically normal children are equivalent in what Chomsky calls language competence, each child's home language environment exerts a marked influence on the development of his performance in reading, writing, giving and understanding oral explanations, etc. The pur-

pose of the study is to isolate those features of adult-child dialogue which are associated with high verbal ability. The study does not deal with vocabulary and syntax. Instead, it records and analyzes adult-child dialogues, seeking answers to such questions as — Who initiates adult-child dialogues? Are adult-child dialogues in the families of the able boys any shorter or longer than those in the average families? And, what are the parents' attitudes toward school success and general verbal proficiency?

To answer these and other questions, the study tape records twenty-one, twenty-minute conversations in the homes of twelve 7½ to 8½ year old boys. The researcher is not present at the time of recording and there are no set tasks or topics, the only constraints being those imposed by the presence of the tape recorder. Each of the 54,000 utterances was assigned to one of five categories of Moves or four categories of Stops. A Move is an utterance which initiates or advances a dialogue. A Stop is an utterance which inhibits or attempts to inhibit a dialogue. Utterances vary in length and complexity from a single word or even "un huh" to several sentences spoken by a single speaker. All dialogues were coded directly from the tapes, each move or stop being identified by a code letter placed in a column below the speaker's name. The sample coding sheet below shows the focal child initiating a short dialogue with his mother and sister and terminating the dialogue himself.

Focal Child	Mother	Sister
A		
	B	
C		
		D
	C	
X		

Four Ways of Treating the Data

Once the data was avaliable on coding sheets, the dialogues of the twelve families were grouped in the following manner for analysis. A. *Total Sample:* Since the total sample contained different total amounts of dialogue for each of the twelve families, the analysis of this data was carried out using percentages of particular moves and stops that occur in the dialogues of a long dialogue are. Do these dialogues, for example, owe their momentum B. *Sub-Sample of 500 Consecutive Utterances:* This sub-sample was taken from the middle of a family's taping session to provide a check on the conclusions derived from the total sample and to provide for samples of identical length that would offset any bias inherent in the fact that the total sample for each family differed markedly from family to family. C. *Longer than Average Dialogues:* These dialogues vary in length because "average" in this case means the average for each family, not the group, since some families showed only a handful of dialogues above the group average. This measure shows potentially two things. First, whether there are group differences in length of dialogue — not only based on ability groups but also on factors like family size and ordinal position. Second, what the characteristics of a particular class of speakers, a particular family, or group of families, to adult or child moves? Who starts and finishes them? D. *Adult-Child Dialogues:* These dialogues included any dialogue involving an adult and a child as contrasted to adult-adult or child-child dialogues. Again the purpose was to identify any group differences that might exist and to characterize

the adult-focal child dialogues in terms of who initiates, extends, and terminates such dialogue. In each of the four data groupings the statistical treatment was the same: a j test was used to gauge the significance of the differences between group means.

Two other ways of characterizing the language environment in the two groups were used. First, one adult, usually the mother, from each family was interviewed (using a questionnaire adapted from Basil Bernstein) regarding such issues as — the degree of parental encouragement for discussion, the amount of parental tutoring, the typical mode of discipline, etc. Second, each family was treated in individual case studies that covered, e.g., typical topics of conversation, the extent to which adults set standards for children's explanations and arguments and the kinds of activities done jointly by adults and children.

Findings

One side effect of the study was to throw into question several traditionally held notions about nurturant home environments. Father absence, which has often been tied to poor verbal development, was shown to have no deleterious effects in terms of either average length or average number of adult-focal child dialogues. It should be understood, of course, that the father-absent families in this sample were relatively small and the children actually seemed to benefit from having the mother's undistracted conversational attention. This would most likely not be the case in a family with more children. Hence, the issue of father absence must be assessed within the context of other aspects of what the family *is* and *does*. The same is true of the two status features of family size and the ordinal position of the focal child. Neither was related to length or number of adult–focal child dialogues. While it is true that adult-child dialogues do not entirely summarize the language environment of a given home, they must be considered at least straws in the wind. As such, they do indicate that ordinal position and family size do not regularly exert a strong and direct influence on the home language environment. This indicates that there are certain important variables in the home environment that can offset an otherwise disadvantageous situation: the middle child in a large family with no father can, through the operation of these variables, receive verbal nurturance from his environment. The following section outlines some of these variables as they emerged from the research reported above.

Since the research uncovered very few statistically significant differences the findings reported below are based instead on trends that remain consistent over several different treatments.

The majority of the findings indicate that adult–focal child dialogues are pivotally related to the verbal ability of the focal child. This conclusion is based in part upon five measures which give a combined adult–focal child interaction score. While no one of these scores correlates with verbal ability, the five combined predict high or average verbal ability in eight out of twelve cases. The measures are: (1) percentage of adult extensions — the percentage of total utterances that constitute attempts by adults to promote further conversation. (2) percentage of adult extensions and indirect responses — same as above but combined with utterances which are not solicited and which do not solicit. (These were included and scored high largely for methodological reasons.) (3) percentage of dialogues of eight or more utterances. This was simply an arbitrary measure of how long an adult and a child talked to each other in each family. A high percentage was given a high score. (4) percentage of two-utterance dialogues. This was an arbitrary index of minimal verbal interaction. A high percentage was given a low

score (5) average length of adult-focal child dialogues. High ratings were given to families in which there was extended adult–focal child dialogue.

According to these indices what are the characteristics of a home that is likely to have a child with above average verbal ability? First, this predominantly middle class sample showed no between group differences in over-all number of utterances. It appears to be the case, however, that the able families do become involved in longer dialogues between adults and focal child than is the case with less able families. Moreover, the trends in measures of adult-child verbal interaction indicate that these longer dialogues have an identifiable set of roles and interaction patterns. The table below summarizes some of the features associated with high verbal ability.

INDEX OF COMPARATIVE VERBAL ACTIVITY

	Average Focal Child	Able Focal Child	Average Mother	Able Mother
— Initiates the largest percentage of all utter-than-average dialogues				X
— Largest percentage of mother initiations followed by focal child direct responses				X
— Focal child emits larger percentage of larger-ances than the mother		X		
— Lowest percentage of all utterances				X
— Most productive focal child group		X		
— Focal child exceeds parents only in direct responses	X			
—Conversational leader in average group			X	
— Exceeds all others in direct responses		X		

What appears from this table is that the mothers of the able boys typically initiate a conversation with their sons and when they have evoked a direct response (typically an answer to a question), encourage the focal children to continue without further prompting. This contrasts to the typical practice in less able homes in several ways. First, while the average focal children produce more direct responses than their mothers, average mothers are in all other respects the uncontested conversational leaders in the average homes. Able mothers, on the other hand, are considerably less active than their sons; though in relation to the average mothers they do start more dialogues by requiring a direct response from their sons. Second, despite the able mother's secondary conversational role, she is responsible for initiating the largest percentage of longer-than-average dialogues in the able families. Thus, she seems able to direct the conversational momentum

so that the topics she raises receive a full discussion, though not a lecture by her. Finally, the able focal child exceeds his average counterpart in all moves except extensions. That is, the average focal child produces a larger proportion of utterances designed to advance the dialogue than does the able boy. That this difference is not reflected in the average length of dialogue indicates that others do not always respond to his attempts to extend the dialogue and that others are not extending as frequently as he is.

Stated in terms of verbal ability, the following picture emerges. Above average verbal ability seems to be associated with a situation in which the mother initiates but then assumes a secondary conversational role. In families where the mother takes the conversational lead in terms of percentages of all utterances, the focal child can be expected to show average verbal ability. This characterization is borne out indirectly by the answers of the two groups to the questionnaire-interview. The bulk of the questions about child rearing practices and attitudes did not produce consistent differentiation between the two groups. However, in eleven out of twelve cases the following question did sort the focal children into two consistent groups. "Should children ever have the opportunity to influence their parents or change their minds on a particular subject?" The able parents, with one exception, said "yes" and the average parents said "no." Thus, those parents who feel their children should be allowed to influence them also provide the conversational and expectational framework in which this transaction can take place.

Implications for Schools

Two seemingly conflicting activities seem to characterize the optimum language learning environment: direct verbal interaction with a more mature speaker, a quantity of verbal output on the part of the learner which exceeds that of the teacher. In school terms — the teacher must talk directly with the learner, not to a whole class of which the learner happens to be a member; and the ground rules must encourage the learner to talk more than the teacher. This is, of course, not substantially different from saying that a child learns best by exercising the ability he is attempting to develop. It is, however, quite different from what goes on in many schools. Whole weeks can go by during which a child neither converses directly with an adult, nor speaks for anything like the amount of time his teacher does. The implications for the role of para-professionals in the classroom and for the kind of training they should receive are strikingly obvious.

It is also apparent that standard dialect instruction would profit by incorporating the two principles enunciated above: (1) The standard dialect teacher should interact *directly* with the student and (2) The student should be encouraged to *use* the dialect he is learning in a school setting. Teachers who have the help of para-professionals are better able to create optimum conditions. Those who do not should seriously consider other approaches to the problems of reading and social mobility. One approach might involve a translation project involving taped material from one dialect that must be translated to the other. Another could be a dialect study of a particular area or representative segment of the school. Although these activities would not teach students the standard dialect, they would make them aware of differences and thus better able to decide about changes they might make.

No matter what the teacher's decision about dialect teaching, if he is teaching children with language problems he must campaign vigorously for an environment in which students interact directly with more able speakers and talk often and extensively about topics that challenge them to use their language more precisely, more concretely, more elaborately, etc. At least they must do this until someone shows that the ideal way for children to

develop their verbal ability is to sit in a group and listen to someone else talk.

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